

[Susan Smallheer, Rutland Herald](#)

Vermont's three-member congressional delegation set the stage this week for the expansion of the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Park.

The boundaries of the park would be expanded under the bill and would pave the way for the Vermont Land Trust to donate its historic King Farm to the national park system.

The 154-acre property was given to the land trust more than 25 years ago and at one time was the headquarters of the land trust, particularly in its early years when it was known as the Ottauquechee Land Trust.

The land trust has been trying to decide what to do with the property, which includes a large 19th-century farmhouse and numerous farm buildings, in addition to pastures and woods.

Under the plan, the goals of its donor, Francisca King Thomas, would be honored, and the farm's mission of promoting agriculture, forestry, conservation and education would be maintained, said Elise Annes, the Land Trust vice president.

Annes called King Thomas a "visionary" who was an early advocate of land conservation.

"She believed deeply in land conservation and the working landscape and she wanted to see the Vermont Land Trust be successful," she said. Her trust outlined very specifically the uses of the land for agriculture and education, she said.

The land trust has long since moved its headquarters to Montpelier, making it difficult to manage the property from a distance, she said. Currently, two land trust staffers are based at the farm, off Route 4 in the general vicinity of Woodstock Union High School. The farm and the existing Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller park share a boundary.

Thomas gave the farm to the land trust in 1986, and the transfer to the federal park system would have to be approved by Windsor Probate Court as well.

"This is a unique opportunity to enhance the mission of the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park and its service to the American people," said U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., in a prepared statement. Leahy said the park and its Conservation Studies Institute would be a "great fit" at the King farm, which would "offer prototypes for conservation and sustainable practices on so many fronts."

According to the land trust, the farm needs about \$300,000 in repairs to the buildings, and an appropriation would be sought to cover those repairs.

Under the plan, the national park would use the farm to support its High School Youth Conservation Leadership Corps., a collaboration between the National Park Service, the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps and Woodstock Union High School. There is also a 'leave no trace' camp for the Student Conservation Association summer trail crew.

There are public hiking and skiing trails that link the King Farm land to the community trail network, and there is a community garden at the King Farm as well.

Annes said Francisca King Thomas' family arrived on the farm in 1807 when Jabez King moved from east of Woodstock. The farmhouse was remodeled and enlarged in 1862 and in 1906, and the farm buildings were added as needed.

The farm has been in continuous agricultural use from 1793 until the current day, although the active dairy operation ended in 1964.

But in recent decades the farm has supported sheep and beef cattle, and horses currently as pastured on the property.

"Today, the King Farm is one of Vermont's best examples of a 19th-century Vermont hill farm and is on the National Registry of Historic Sites," she wrote in an e-mail.

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., called the proposed expansion of "two Woodstock institutions" a move to preserve "Vermont's most important traditions."